

CIA was right after all

Among the many items of useful information in the now-banned secret Army report on Vietnam, this fact emerges: The intelligence services were a great deal more right than the little clique around President Johnson who weighed — and disregarded — their information. The fact should be duly recorded in all fairness, since intelligence — Army, Navy and CIA — has been criticized long and often for real or presumed bloopers in Vietnam.

There was, for example, the period in early 1964 when the administration became convinced that the Viet Cong was the creature of the Hanoi government. Its conclusion was that by bombing North Vietnam, it could stop the guerrillas in the South.

Intelligence countered that the Viet Cong was basically an indigenous movement and could not be strongly affected by punishing North Vietnam. President Johnson and most of his key advisers rejected the intelligence advice, and proceeded with plans to "undermine" the Viet Cong by bombing North Vietnam.

The CIA was also early in rejecting the domino theory, contending that the fall of South Vietnam would not lead to the fall of other nations in the area (with the possible exception of Cambodia) and an inexorable spread of communism. Again, the President and his advisers disregarded the intelligence estimates and clung to the theory that they were fighting a war to prevent the Chinese takeover of the whole subcontinent.

"The American intelligence community," says the report, "repeatedly provided the policymakers with what proved to be accurate warnings that desired goals were either unattainable or likely to provoke costly reactions from the enemy," but the policymakers went on serenely overruling the CIA and other intelligence services.

Objective analysis is the business of intelligence, and it must have been disillusioning to the professionals to find their best efforts constantly spurned by the highly placed amateurs in the White House. The report should drive home the lesson that wishful thinking is a poor foundation on which to build national policy.